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death and murder first appeared in the world. The couple who remained did not know what to do with the dead body. They carried the corpse on their shoulders for three days, lamenting and crying, but could not get rid of it. At last, God caused the earth to open, and they placed the body inside. Thus the practice of burial and of the three days' mourning for the dead began.[1] The couple now stayed together and begot a male child, who became the ancestor of the Nupe people.'

If, then, Nupe mythology is a very inadequate guide to dogma and doctrine, this inadequacy is itself significant, revealing the Nupe attitude towards their creed and indeed the whole tenor of their religious thought in their true perspective. Mythology, as we have said, illustrates and exemplifies rather than enunciates the creed. We may go further and say that it expresses the creed in a form less abstract and theoretical than does formulated doctrine. For myths borrow the phraseology of realistic accounts, dealing as they do with near-humans and near-natural events; thus they make less demand upon sheer credence, compromise with ordinary imagination, and as it were vulgarize the dogma. If, then, primitive religions rely on mythical narratives rather than on dogmatic assertions they seem to discard the more abstract contents of religious thought. Yet Nupe religion, which does not employ mythology either to any great extent, is clearly not of this kind. If the Nupe do not attempt a specific, coherent formulation of their creed, neither do they seek to re-phrase it in more concrete and would-be realistic language. In other words, Nupe religion forgoes the means of 'vulgarizing' the dogma. Thus, though its creed may be inarticulate, yet it is held in all abstractness.

3. CATEGORIES

(i) *God and the World*

The most basic concept of Nupe theology, that of the supreme being, is also the widest. In a sense it stands for the whole realm of religion, serving to separate all things that belong to that realm from others that do not. For in order to express this distinction the Nupe say of an object, phenomenon, or type of action that it is, or is not, *nyá Sokó*—'of God' or 'belonging to God'. There are two inaccuracies in this broad category of things religious. The clause 'of God' in the sense here understood is properly applied only in the context of discussions turning upon the dichotomy of the religious and profane. In a wider context the phrase loses its disjunctive implication; for ultimately everything is 'of God', that

[1] There is no such rule of 'three days' mourning'.

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is, is his creation. But the relationship between God and the created world is once more viewed as a dichotomy. And in this final context only the forms of religious action which bear on the living, active powers of the deity are 'of God', while all others, having become part of his completed creation, are classed with the 'things in the world'.

We shall later exemplify this somewhat sophisticated point in Nupe theology. As regards the dualism of God and the World, it is aligned with yet another, of more concrete character, of the sky and the earth. Together, these four concepts describe the Nupe universe; for it contains no other cosmic entities, for example, no underworld or some yonder inhabited by the spirits of the dead; nor have the Nupe anything to say about the stars, the sun, or the moon. In all relevant respects the created world (*yiže*) is identical with the earth (*kin*); while the Creator is identified with the sky. Though the supreme being is also addressed or referred to as *tsóci*, 'Our Lord',[1] his proper name is *Sokó*, which is best translated as God-the-Sky, the same word also denoting the sky in the visible, physical sense.[2]

As God is identified with the sky, so he is also said to dwell in the sky. But this belief is vague and contradicted by other statements, as are most assertions on the nature of the supreme deity. In fact, nothing very definite can be said or is known about God. He is not on earth, and the most common and most strongly emphasized comment on the nature of the deity is *Sokó lokpá*, 'God is far away'. Yet in a different, more mystic sense he is present, always and everywhere; thus in a song I recorded it is said—

God is in front,
He is in the back.

God has clearly awareness, intellect, and some of the sensitiveness of man; for he is addressed and appealed to in everyday language. But he is hidden and cannot be seen; nor is he personified more concretely; indeed, no one knows if he is or is not like man.[3]

[1] The suffix *-ci* means 'our'; the word *tsó* occurs normally as a suffix of other words, denoting 'owner of' or 'master of', e.g. *kin-tsó*, Owner of the Land, *emi-tsó*, Family Head.

[2] There exists another word for 'sky', *sama*, which is of Hausa-Arabic origin and is used, at least today, when referring to the sky and firmament in the material sense, e.g. 'the sky is black', 'the sky is clear', etc. The word *Sokó*, incidentally, also indicates something big or great, the suffix *-kó* having that implication.

[3] Strictly speaking, therefore, there is no justification for calling the supreme deity 'he'. In Nupe language this issue does not arise since the personal pronouns have no gender and do not distinguish between animate and inanimate objects. For purely practical reasons, however, I shall continue to employ the personal pronoun in the masculine.

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Characteristically, any thought of gaining more precise knowledge of the deity is regarded as absurd and may well be ridiculed, as in this somewhat slangy proverb: 'The thing that conceals God, go and buy it.'

Only these facts are positively and universally known and are often argued when the Nupe wish to compare their beliefs with those of other peoples: God is all-powerful, as he is all-knowing; there is only one God, and no other deities exist; God was in the beginning, before the appearance of man and the creation of nature, being himself the creator of all things. And here we must note that the phrase 'all things' is meant to include things good as well as evil, which article of creed appears, circuitously phrased, in various secular songs. Thus one song contains this phrase—'A being which God did not create, neither did the world create it'; and another runs thus—'Should you do anything that is beautiful, God has caused it to be beautiful; should you do anything evil, God has caused it to be evil.'

The Nupe deity, then, is something like the *causa causans* of mediæval philosophy, though the crucial problem of that philosophy, how to reconcile an omnipotent deity with the presence of evil in the world, is not really seen as a problem. Good and evil are both laid into the same creation, as are the various sources of evil —malevolent spirits, disease, witchcraft. Without further speculations about a Free Will, or the weakness of mind and matter, or Satan, the deficiencies of the world are taken for granted. The only problem in Nupe theology is the actual power of evil, not its origin. And this power is justified, once more without moral speculations, by accepting, simply, the aloofness of the deity. In other words, one does not wonder why God did not create a better world; but one attempts to answer the question—Why does God not better protect man, who has to live in this world? The answer, as we shall see, is that divine concern with the world is limited.

Here a slight correction is necessary. The Nupe do mention Satan or the Devil; but they only just mention him and no more. He is called *Abilí* or *Jibilílu*, and sometimes *Sheitán*. The last name is, of course, Arabic and a loan-word in Nupe. So is *Jibilílu*, which is the Nupe version of the Arabic *Jibríl*, an angel of the Qoran having been changed into an African Devil. Whether *Abilí* is an original word or a further corruption of *Jibríl*, it is difficult to say; the Nupe use of the word in ordinary conversation seems to suggest the former. It is commonly employed to denote some unexpected evil turn of events, for example, a quarrel between friends or the discovery that an otherwise truthful person has been guilty of a lie. On occasions like these the people would exclaim—'Ah, the devil is at work' or, literally, '*Abilí* is present'. But though the

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Nupe firmly hold that the devil exists, that he is behind many (though not all) evil things, and that there is only one devil (while there are many evil spirits), their knowledge of Satan carries no further; nor does he play any part in religious observances. Only diviners might refer to *Sheitán* or *Abilí* in connection with a particularly sinister prophecy. Above all, the Nupe hold that God has created the devil, so that Satan, far from being a counterpart of the deity, is only one of his ambiguous creatures.

There is no doubt in the minds of the Nupe that God, as he created the world, so he can also control it and intervene in its course. Everyday speech is full of phrases such as 'with God's help', 'may God give this or that', or 'may God cause such-and-such to happen'. To describe, incidentally, this divine intervention one uses the ordinary causative mode and the same verbs that are applied to human actions. One also swears by God and lends weight to any assertion by adding *be Sokó nyi*—'by God'. But these allusions imply little certainty that God will in fact intervene; for 'God is far', aloof, outside the world; which tenet overrules all other notions.

This belief has an important consequence: one cannot approach God directly. Although every ritual act is accompanied by some phrase or blessing invoking *Sokó*, there are no prayers specifically addressed to God and capable of being employed freely and independently of the appointed ceremonial occasions. Rather, the approach to the deity is circuitous, that is, through the given ceremonials or rituals. If we call the belief in God-the-Creator the first article of the Nupe creed, the second would be this conception of ritual as an intermediary between God and man.

(ii) *Ritual Force*

The condition that God is approached implicitly in every ceremonial and solely in this manner is regarded, not as fortuitous, but as having been willed by God and embodied in his creation. Equally, it is regarded as peculiar to the Nupe form of worship. To quote a typical comment: The Mohammedans can pray to God directly; but *Sokó* is 'so very far from men' that he gave them the ritual as an intermediary—a 'thing-in-between'. The ritual is thus a gift of God or 'of God'—*nyá Sokó*; but being an intermediary, the ritual is also of this world. Now, the Nupe will readily quote an inventory of the world, thus: 'In the world there are these things—*zuzungíši*, human beings; *ena goniáši*, animals; *aljenúši*, spirits; and *husi*, ritual.' With one exception, this list fully accounts for the Nupe picture of creation, though the nature of animate beings is itself composite and requires a further list of attributes. For the moment we are concerned only with the last item on the list and

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with its twofold citizenship, among the 'things of God' and the 'things of the world'.

In translating *kuti* as 'ritual' we are not conveying the full import of the conception. We shall later speak of other acts of worship—invocation of ancestors, sacrifices to twins or medicine shrines, offerings to spirits; all these are ritual actions as we understand the word, and the Nupe too acknowledge the underlying identity by calling the crucial act, the sacrifice, offering or libation, by the same name—*labá*. But *kuti* means more, even though it always includes the phase of *labá* and in one form does not go beyond it. For the people the external procedure of *kuti*, the things you can see and hear and easily describe, stands for something more obscure and intangible, even unknowable. Nor is the nature of *kuti* exhausted by saying that it is a means of communicating with the deity. For there are many *kuti*, each with an identity and power of its own; each also has its individual name, and some are 'stronger' than others, and more or less dangerous. The *kuti* is called a 'thing', *enya*; it is also something that you 'make' or 'do'; equally it is said to know its priests and congregation, as though it were an intelligent being. The Nupe do not deny these contradictions and obscurities; they would simply hold that they are beyond human understanding. There is the Nupe saying—'Such-and-such *kuti*: a speech (explaining it) does not come first'; which means, you may learn the names and procedures of *kuti*; but as for the rest, no explanation must be expected. Ultimately, no one can see, hear, or know the *kuti*; to wit, these verses from the song cycle connected with the most important ritual of Nupe, *gunnu*—

> Do you know the *gunnu*?
> You do not know it.
> For can you hear it?

Yet though the nature of *kuti* cannot be fully grasped, the external procedures are known and can be learned. There are rules about performing a particular *kuti*, guarding it, keeping away from it or protecting it from illicit knowledge; and by means of these procedures, which are both delicate and on occasion dangerous, humans are enabled to tap some mysterious but in essence divine force. Also, the procedures belong to humans, much as material possessions belong to their owners. Thus it is considered a general and important characteristic of the Nupe people, which gives them a distinct position in *rebus sacris*, that they collectively 'own' the ritual called *gunnu*, while different sections of the tribe possess other rituals besides, and different tribes rituals of other kinds. Mostly, however, this 'ownership' is understood more narrowly,

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being ascribed to single village communities; and as these 'own' such-and-such *kuti*, so they can exercise a certain mastery over the universe on given occasions and for given aims. Generically, *kuti* is a portion of cosmic power, which is in itself unspecific but is capable of being harnessed and canalized into specific efficacy in particular rituals; or more briefly, *kuti* is the Force-that-is-in-ritual.

We have noted the twofold nature of *kuti* as a thing-in-between God and man. In one sense, it plays the part of a gesture or utterance whereby man brings his wishes to the attention of the deity; but in another it is also a thing-in-between man and the power which, we must presume, God normally wields when he makes or remakes the world. Let me argue this point from the Nupe point of view. Men, they would hold, cannot hope to move the remote and aloof deity by prayers alone; but they possess, in *kuti*, a means of drawing directly upon the power that is God's. There is this saying: 'The human being, he makes *kuti*; God, he causes it to come', that is, to have the desired power or efficacy. In a way, it is as simple as that—a matter almost of pressing a button. But the fact that human beings can thus simply summon divine action, is itself due to an act of divine providence. Paradoxically speaking, the Nupe deity, concerned over the limits set to his concern with the fate of men, bestowed upon them, not the efficacy of prayer (which might not reach him), but a portion of his own force. In this sense, then, the ritual is a shortcut as well as an intermediary and has the greater effectiveness of such a direct access to the causes that move the world. This notion too has been formulated, if more elliptically, in these verses from the *gunnu* cycle of songs—

(*If someone said:*) 'Give me for the sake of God',
I should give him nothing.
(*If someone said:*) 'Give me for the sake of the *gunnu*,'
There it is—I give him.

Which means, in simple language: While it is of little avail to invoke God, the performance of the *gunnu* (or any other *kuti*) is always effective.

This, incidentally, is a somewhat optimistic view, as we shall discover later, when discussing the occasions for ritual and the precise expectations that go with them. We may anticipate this, however. As *kuti* are vested in, or 'owned' by, communities, so the aims and occasions of their performance essentially bear on the problems of community life.[1] These are the ubiquitous and perennial

[1] This is true of the 'fixed' rituals, which have their firm place in the Nupe calendar. Certain of the 'movable' *kuti* can on occasion be performed for the sake of individuals, though their performance is still in the hands of the community priest (see below, p. 87).

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problems of survival which face, not this or that individual, but the collectivity, such as droughts, epidemics, the fertility of the land, and the fertility of the population. The close association of *kuti* with the well-being of the whole community is convincingly expressed in the concluding formula of every ritual, whatever its occasion—*Sokó lá ežì u ge*: 'May God grant that the village (or town) prospers.'

Let me make it clear that the efficacy of the ritual lies in the whole of the procedure and not in any of its elements, not even in the language employed on such occasions. Though invocations and prayer-like formulae play their part in ritual, they are not peculiar to it; like the act of *labá* they also occur, in much the same form, in other observances and are by themselves without any power. Significantly, they are often couched in language which is nondescript or takes the form of riddles and parables representing comments upon the ritual rather than crucial stages in the procedure. Also, the language can be varied without affecting the efficacy of the rite; thus I could record songs in one ritual which were borrowed from another, the people's comments being that 'it made no difference'. Nor yet are there material objects, effigies and the like, which might be said to contain the supernatural power. Most rituals have their customary places, and some of the sacred songs speak of the 'initiates entering the house' of the *kuti*; but this is a mere metaphor, for no Nupe ritual has a 'house' or 'temple', or indeed a locality which is on all occasions 'sacred', barred to the uninitiate, or avoided by the people. On occasion, the localities are changed without further ado, for example, when a village grows and encroaches upon the grounds hitherto reserved for the ritual. The cult objects, if they exist at all, are usually things of no sacred association—boughs or leaves carried in the dances, unimportant animals killed in the sacrifice, and pots and dishes used for cooking and eating.

There are exceptions. In a few places I found rituals associated with stones, either ordinary rocks in the ground or (in two instances only) round stone balls supported on carved wooden posts. Sometimes the rituals are even named accordingly, for example, *ʃitákuŋ*, 'The Stone drinks' (a ceremonial from Doko and Pichi), or *takúŋžiko*, 'Black Stone' (a ritual from Katcha). Other cult objects seem to be of alien origin, such as the masks of the *elo* ritual of Mokwa, which betrays Yoruba influence, and the 'thunderbolts' used in a fertility cult known to come from Gwari. The most elaborate cult objects in Nupe, certain bronze figures in human shape, occur only in the Niger valley, in the two villages Jebba and Tada, and are again said to be of alien origin; they also belong to a very special series of rites, associated with the mythical

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founder of Nupe kingdom and serving the interests of the state. We shall later deal with these 'exceptions'. Let me here stress that in calling them that I am taking my lead from the people. Indeed, the Nupe would altogether disregard these lapses from a wholly abstract creed, which seems to require no effigies or visible symbols; for when comparing their religion with that of other peoples, the Nupe will always emphasize that they have no sacred emblems, idols, masks, or 'little likenesses' (*zazagíži*).

It is perhaps not surprising that so abstract a conception as that of *kuti* should not be held with equal clarity by everyone. In particular, I met with two as it were heterodox notions; one was the idea that *kuti* represents a part of *Sokó*, or a *Sokó tetengi*, a 'Little God' (which, in Nupe language, is a contradiction in terms); according to the other, God was 'up above', but *kuti* was somehow of the earth, being a 'thing' buried in the ground, very likely in the places of ritual. These notions were always put tentatively, and were moreover voiced by individuals who could not claim the fullest knowledge available in the society, that is, by younger men or by Nupe under the influence of Islam; the older men, and especially the priests of *kuti*, declared such views to be false. But supernatural power understood more concretely and associated with specific material objects also has a place in the Nupe universe. This notion is embodied in the third tenet of the religion, which concerns the existence of *cigbe* or 'medicine'.

(iii) *Medicine*

Let me say, first of all, that 'medicine' is the literal translation of the vernacular term, which is applied not only to 'magic' substances but also to medicinal herbs or drugs of any kind, native as well as European, whose properties are assessed essentially empirically. Of the relation between the two we shall speak in a later context. Here we must note that the Nupe inventory of the 'things in the world' does not mention 'medicine', although in some respects it is an exact counterpart to *kuti*, that is, an agency meant to aid man in a universe governed by an all-too-distant deity. But unlike *kuti*, 'medicine' is not thought of as being part of the creation and a primordial gift of God. If it now exists in the world, it does so because of man's own endeavours. There is a legend, well known throughout the country, expounding this view.

'There was a certain younger brother, called Kpara, whose elder brother was Tswasha Malu. They lived in the time of *Etsu* (king) Shagó.[1] There existed a certain medicine, called *cekpyeca shina*

[1] The two brothers are mentioned in no other myth. The name of the king, Shagó, occurs also in the myth describing the origin of the

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shina buburukun (meaningless words). On the day when the two brothers were making this medicine, Kpara wished to climb up into the sky. Kpara explained to the king that he needed a chain. The king summoned the blacksmiths of the whole country and they forged a chain of seven links. Then Kpara tied the chain round his waist and went straight up, higher and higher, until he reached the sky. It took him three years to travel up to the sky, and people thought they would never see him again. At the end of the three years people beheld the chain dropping slowly down to earth, and 19 days later, Kpara himself dropped from the sky, sitting down, bang, on top of the chain. The people asked—Had he seen God? Kpara answered (this part is sung):

God is far away,
God is far away,
But medicines are applied on earth.

"The person who tries to eat porridge while shouting at the same time will get nothing into his stomach" (i.e. one must not attempt the impossible). Kpara then said to all the people that they must try and make medicine of ingredients. "For God is not watching man." This Kpara was the elder brother of the father who begot us—our tribe, that is.'

This legend or myth introduces two crucial features into Nupe doctrine. One is the assertion that 'God is not watching man', or literally, *Sokó nw' ă yelé à*, 'God is not seeing'; the other is the notion that that powerful agency, *cigbe*, has been produced or discovered by man's own initiative. The two clearly hang together, both following logically from the root concept of the supreme being. The assertion that God 'is not watching' only expands and sharpens that other idea, that God, though creative and omnipotent, 'is far away'—too far away to follow closely his handiwork, and too impersonal to concern himself closely with all that happens on earth. And it is this extreme aloofness of the deity which justifies the further notion of human self-help. God, as we know, cannot be reached by prayers and invocations alone. Thus there have to be intermediaries, of which *kuti* is one and *cigbe* the other. But there is this difference. Only the *kuti* is 'of God'; equally, it provides only for the collective and unvarying needs of a people, not for the more variable and particular troubles of individuals. As regards these, God seems even more remote; for he has not thought of giving man the appropriate aids: rather, they had to be discovered by man left to himself. Here, then, we have

anti-witchcraft cult *ndakó gboyá* (see below, p. 173). Shagó is probably identical with the mythical hero and deity of Yoruba religion, Shangó, who, in Yoruba mythology, is described as a man or king of Nupe.

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something like a Free Will, though crudely conceived and devoid of ethical implications. All the Nupe concept implies is that man can attempt to correct creation, and is compelled to do so by his knowledge (as the myth has it) that 'you cannot have everything' —live on earth and have the full protection of God.

This is a naïve and, if you like, cynical philosophy. Within its frame of reference, however, everything falls into place and *kuti* and *cigbe* appear complementary in many ways. We said before that the *kuti* is understood both as a means of reaching the attention of the deity and as a means of drawing more directly upon the divine (or cosmic) force, as an 'intermediary' as well as a 'shortcut'. Now *cigbe* is a shortcut much more than it is a medium of appeal. If in *kuti* the invocation of the deity and the harnessing of a cosmic force are made to merge, in 'medicine' that force is more independently effective and works in the manner almost of a machine. In preparing or administering 'medicine' the name of *Sokó* is often mentioned; but now it occurs, not in the context of a prayer-like appeal, but in a *spell*, every word and phrase of which is important and unchangeable. At the same time the mastery of *cigbe* is strictly technical; the Nupe say that it is *kpeyé*, 'knowledge', and nothing else. This knowledge no longer refers to total procedures embracing prayers, localities hallowed by the occasion, the occasions themselves, songs, dances, and all the phases of the ritual performance; rather does it refer to highly specialized *skills*, primarily to the skill of *gbá gbèrè*, 'using ingredients', that is, to a skill in manipulating and manufacturing material things. For the *cigbe* is always material, some object or substance whose efficacy is communicated by physical contact or therapeutic administration. We note the ambiguous role of medicine, which is opposed to ritual both as another (more 'machine-like') form of supernatural control and as an altogether different kind of mastery, through technical-empirical knowledge. For the Nupe, the latter alignment counts more heavily: if they were to use our phraseology they would say that the practice of medicine is less 'religious' (or 'supernatural') than ritual, and in many instances entirely non-religious.

Again, the conception of ownership differs fundamentally in the case of *kuti* and *cigbe*. The former is 'owned' corporately by groups, and the question of acquisition does not arise (save in mythical speculations). Though the ritual procedures can be learned, and are learned by every new generation, this is a secondary feature, incidental to the right or title to the ritual knowledge; which title is vested, inalienably, in the tribe or village community. It makes no sense, in Nupe, to ask whether strangers can learn and put themselves in possession of a *kuti*. If they are adopted into the

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community, they will also learn about the ritual and share in its possession; otherwise they remain without the crucial title, even though they may conceivably come to know all about the technical procedure. In *cigbe*, the latter is everything: who learns, possesses, and the learning is open to any individual who can find a teacher. Admittedly, certain medicines are today owned by families and passed on from generation to generation; but with few exceptions this vested ownership is only of the kind that applies to trade secrets, and everyone understands that, originally, the knowledge of such family *cigbe* had again been taught and learned, perhaps even bought. Medicines of all kinds can still be purchased, regularly and openly, from their makers; you might also purchase the knowledge of how to prepare them, though this would be done only occasionally and in secrecy. Finally, both the medicine and the recipe may be brought in from another country. Now, it would once more be nonsensical to think of a *kuti* that can be bought; and though a few rituals are said to have been introduced from abroad, this was the work either of immigrant groups, which 'owned' the *kuti* by right and are still called its 'owners', or of mythical figures and heroes. In brief, the *kuti* is part of the traditional estate of communities; the *cigbe* is individual property, fortuitously acquired and held. With the different title of possession goes the corresponding conception of the benefits conferred by the possession, which are once more collective in the case of ritual and individual in the case of medicine. This contrast is thrown into relief in the invocations accompanying the two practices; for the prayer formula invariably voiced in all Nupe rituals, 'May God grant that the village prospers', is as invariably absent in the *cigbe* spells.

Here we are touching upon a final difference between *kuti* and *cigbe*, which goes deep into the ethical foundations of the Nupe creed. The *kuti* is, *ex definitione*, good; it always serves to secure benefits—prosperity, health, success—and to combat evils or ills —disease, drought, barrenness. Many 'medicines' do the same; but some may also serve evil purposes, that is, they may be meant to further the egoistic aims of individuals while harming the rest of the people. *Cigbe*, then, is potentially 'anti-social'; and, logically, the force of evil *par excellence*, witchcraft, is by many attributed to the efficacy of *cigbe*. Now, as God is the indifferent creator of things both good and evil, *kuti* and *cigbe* represent the two sides of his nature. Not all that is evil or ill in the world is due to *cigbe* or witchcraft; indeed, various evils and ills may be diminished by the agency of *cigbe*. But 'medicine' remains a supernatural agency which men might wield for disaster and harm. Thus the conception of 'medicine' reflects, on a smaller scale, the ethical

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indifference which the Nupe ascribe to divine creation. Yet since the world contains both things, *kuti*, which is good, and *cigbe*, which is both good and evil, the good would seem on balance to preponderate. As we shall see, various other religious thoughts confirm this impression of a cynicism tempered with optimism.

(iv) *Body and Soul*

We turn to the other 'things in the world' and first to the animate beings. Each of these possesses, to begin with, a body, *nakã*. The Nupe word means precisely what we mean by 'body'—the flesh and blood of living creatures, resulting from procreation, parturition, and natural growth, and decomposing after death. The biological processes of procreation and parturition are fairly well understood, though this empirical knowledge is not free from fallacies. Thus no one misunderstands the connection between coitus and conception; one understands, too, that both women and men can be infertile, and that abortion can be brought about by strong laxatives or overstrain. At the same time the Nupe also use certain purely 'magical' cures for barrenness and charms or magic belts to prevent conception. More surprisingly, the Nupe fail to distinguish between semen and male urine, or have to borrow a word from Hausa to describe the former. Nor finally is the precise length of pregnancy known. To quote one of my informants, a diviner and knowledgeable old man: 'It all depends; it may take anything between seven months and a year; a strong and fit child will be born after eleven months or so, a weak one after a shorter period.'

The biological processes as such, one believes, produce only a lifeless body, as death in turn leaves the body lifeless but still physically intact. The living being thus has further attributes, of soul-like nature, which are three in number: *rayi* or 'anima'; *fifingi* or 'shadow soul', and *bori* or 'personal soul'.

The word *rayi* is used generally to denote the living state; the pulse, for example, is called *rayigi*, 'little life'. Everything animate possesses *rayi*, while stones, pieces of wood, and similar inanimate objects are without *rayi*; growing trees and plants, however, are counted among the animate things. Life comes from God and exists with God, in the sky, when it is not incarnate. At death 'God takes it away'; at birth it is sent down by God, more precisely, it appears already when the child first moves in the womb. The new life is thus at first tied to the life of the mother, and in a sense remains so tied for a period even after birth. For the mother who has borne one child must not risk another conception before the child can walk and is 'sufficiently strong', lest it would never grow up; so that its *rayi* would seem to be diminished by the other life

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that is growing in the mother.[1] Though this notion is not fully thought out, this much is clear: the *rayi* is a quantity, which increases with growth and diminishes with old age and in all forms of illness; it is impersonal, without sex or individual features; it is common to and infinitely divisible among all animate beings. It is a life principle or life soul, the Latin *anima*, and nothing more specific or personal. All that is peculiar to the individual human being, his appearance, his character, his particular spirit and intellect, comes from the two other entities, *fifingi* and, especially, *kuci*.

As death represents the complete severance of body and *anima*, so disease weakens the link and attacks the life principle. In sleep, body and life soul are separated temporarily and more lightly; normally, the *rayi* will return to the body; but one cannot predict that this will always happen, so that a person may die in his sleep. It is then, incidentally, when the life soul is loosened from the body, that it can be harmed by witches, who, as we shall hear, 'feed' on the *rayi*. When I dream, my *rayi* wanders about and sees all the things that come to me in the dream. But the *rayi* does not wander alone; it takes something with it that is, though not of the body, yet of bodily shape; for I may appear to others in their dreams, as in turn I dream of other persons. It is not, of course, the real, full person that is met with in dreams (for the real person may be away in other parts, or asleep at home), but only his or her image or shadow—the *fifingi*.

Fifingi means 'shadow' much as we understand the word, that is, the shadow thrown by men and animals, not the shade caused by inanimate things. But the word has a second, mystic, meaning, best translated as 'shadow soul'; for when a person dies and his body decomposes the *fifingi* continues to exist and will still be visible (as in our dreams of dead people). Normally, nothing further can be said about the *fifingi*; beyond appearing in dreams it has no effectiveness. It is not identical with the dead whose disembodied souls may act as the guardians of the living or be invoked in sacrifices: these souls or spirits represent that other entity, the *kuci*, to which we shall presently return. But in certain cases the *fifingi*, too, are active after death; they are said to find no rest, to haunt houses or localities, scare travellers, and to cause nightmares when they visit people in their dreams. This happens when a person, having died an unnatural death or in a strange place, was buried without the proper rites; in which case a symbolic burial *in absentia* will lay the ghost. More vaguely one also believes that evil persons are similarly condemned to wander about restlessly after death. In either case, however, it is not really

[1] This rule refers specifically to conception, not to sexual intercourse; for the parents may practise *coitus interruptus*.

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the *fifingi* which acts in this fashion, although one may loosely use this term; for in the cases just described the shadow soul turns into something else—a *farâ*, a ghost or spirit.

As I have already suggested, the *kuci* corresponds to something like a 'personal soul'. But this is an obscure conception, and all informants will at some stage of the discussion plead ignorance or the presence of a final mystery. The Nupe believe in reincarnation, the souls of the dead being re-embodied in their offspring; it is these transmuted souls which are called *kuci*. One does not in this connection think of distant and perhaps unknown ancestors, but of great-grandparents or even grandparents reborn in their children's children. The rebirth can occur in either line of descent, which fits well into the Nupe kinship system with its strong emphasis on bilateral descent. Whether the ancestors are paternal or maternal, as they are reborn, so their personal qualities, of character (good or bad) as well as physical likeness, reappear. The body, *nakã*, is thus partly shaped by the ancestral soul or *kuci*, which is said to 'enter' it much as a fluid or substance enters a vessel (while the *rayi* does not 'enter' the body but merely gives life to it).

The *kuci* appears in the act of birth, that is, it 'enters' a body already possessing life, and the new-born is in fact called 'a *kuci*', unnamed. For a time body, life soul, and *kuci* are not yet firmly united. Body and life soul merge fully when the umbilical cord is cut; but the *kuci* will not be in full harmony with the other two until it has been identified by divination and the infant's name (which is the name of the reincarnated ancestor) has been pronounced for the first time. The crying of the babe, too, will cease at that moment, since it is only a sign that the new-born senses the initial disharmony. In other words, the three components of the living being become reconciled when the link between human vessel and ancestral soul is acknowledged socially, that is, by the symbol of a name. Only then does the *kuci* lose its other-worldly nature and become fully of this world; while the infant is from then on a person, and not only a breathing body. Henceforth it will be called *egi*, child, and no longer *kuci*, disembodied soul or spirit. The *kuci* therefore adds to the *anima* or life soul a 'personal soul', which is also the carrier of heredity and of kinship continuity.

It is difficult to say just how personal this soul concept is. It is certainly specifically human; for animals have no *kuci*, as they have no names or kin groups. Yet the relationship between the ancestral *kuci* and its reincarnation is not of a one-to-one kind. The same ancestral soul may animate numerous progeny, all living at the same time; indeed, it is said that there 'is no limit' to the number of simultaneous incarnations of the same *kuci*. Here,

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then, the *kuci* appears as an impersonal principle of descent and heredity, even as something like a biological strain mystically interpreted. It is consistent with this latter conception that the *kuci* should be held to be sexless, so that the soul of either grandparent may appear in offspring of either sex. This theory, however, is belied in practice; for I have found few personal names that can be given both to males and females; rather are male and female names sharply distinguished, which would presuppose the opposed assumption of a sex-linked reincarnation. And once, when I was present during the divination of the *kuci* of a new-born child and commented on the likely identity of the *ndakó* (grandfather) in question, the diviner corrected me, pointing out that the child was a girl and that her soul would therefore come from a *nnakó* (grandmother).

The two conceptions, of a 'personal' and of a 'kinship soul', conflict, above all, in the beliefs concerning their fate after death. At death, the *kuci* is said to leave the body and to return to God, if only temporarily, until it finds a new incarnation. Yet it is also said to stay on earth, watching over its kinsfolk in the manner of a guardian spirit and ready to come to their aid in various ways. The *kuci*, incidentally, does so indirectly, having no power of its own, but acting in some fashion through *Sokó*. To enlist the aid of the *kuci*, one performs special sacrifices (*labá*) in the house or on the grave of this or that ancestor. Now, such a belief in the souls or spirits of the dead which, while not at the time incarnated, interest themselves in their surviving kin, would seem to reconcile satisfactorily the two conceptions of a personal soul and one bound to lines of descent. But Nupe belief failed to work out a consistent solution on these lines. Thus the ancestral sacrifices are performed both on the grave of the grandfather most recently dead (and hence hardly yet reincarnated) and on the grave of the most remote known ancestor (who will surely have found a new body). And if, in the latter case, one knows of one outstanding person among the ancestors, the sacrifice will be addressed to him. On the other hand, one need not sacrifice to any particular, named ancestor at all; often, the people address an anonymous *kuci*, that is, the souls of the dead in a generic sense. This is done invariably, in an informal fashion, whenever one drinks beer; then a small libation is poured on the ground, for a *kuci* no further defined.

There is no orthodox answer to the question how the *kuci* can be 'with God' and on earth at the same time, or how it can influence God when it has already entered upon another incarnation. When pursuing this point I received these diverse replies. A first informant made the revolutionary suggestion that there might be two *Sokó*, one in the sky, the other on earth; needless to say, this

notion was rejected by everybody else. A second view was more widely held, namely, that the *kuci* remains on earth but is watched by God, so that your appeal to the *kuci* will yet reach God; the *kuci*, then, would be 'with God' only in a metaphorical sense. A third informant argued as follows, with somewhat dubious logic: Since you cannot see either God or *kuci*, it follows that they are together. Finally, there was the unprofitable but incontrovertible reply, that here we have a mystery of which 'man is ignorant'.

If the Nupe failed to work out a clear and consistent conception of this survival of 'personal souls', they equally failed to exploit its potentialities. The belief in souls of the dead which remain concerned with the fate of their living kin and are reincarnated in progeny would seem to lend itself ideally to an ethical interpretation. Yet there is no trace of this. There is no conception of the *kuci* being angered by the sins or offences of the living, perhaps refusing its aid or sending punishment. In appealing to the *kuci* the suppliant expects help, not rewards, and help untempered with justice; the help may not come; but this only means that the circumstances were unfavourable or the difficulties too great. Nor is the fate of the soul after death affected by the deeds or character of the living person. It is the same for good men and evil, and the idea that the two might fare differently in the beyond is simply not understood. 'When a person dies, we no longer see him', is all the Nupe find to say on this topic. Which is another facet of that ethical indifference we noted before.

The *kuci* is invariably invoked in the ceremonials surrounding the crucial events of kinship life—birth, marriage, death. Apart from this, *kuci* worship has no special domain, nor is it subject to any regular routine. The sacrifices to ancestors represent casual appeals, performed *ad hoc*, for a variety of reasons, and nearly always on the advice of diviners. Of ten informants one had performed the sacrifice three times in the last four years, because of his ill-health; one had sacrificed twice, first because his horse was sick, and then because his child had smallpox; six informants had sacrificed once during that period—three because of illness, two because of a drought, and one for no particular reason and without consulting a diviner. One informant had performed no *kuci* sacrifice for seven years, and another had sacrificed regularly every year; but he was a village chief, and in his case the sacrifice, addressed to the ancestor who was also the founder of the village, had merged with a *kuti* 'belonging' to the community.

This fusion of *kuci* worship with another type of observance is not an isolated case. As we shall see, it is also entailed in the possession of certain 'great', hereditary medicines, which similarly

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absorb the appeals to ancestors. This is only another aspect of their lack of a special 'domain'. And even where *kuci* worship does not lose its independence so completely, it yet has little autonomy; for the kind of supernatural aid it promises can equally be procured by other forms of worship or sacrifice. But of this, too, we shall speak later.

Let me conclude the present account with the brief mention of a further ambiguous practice, a form of sacrifice which stands halfway between an appeal to *Sokó* and the appeal to *kuci*. It is performed by families in which there are or have been twins and is known by that name, *bakomba*. Such houses will possess a special shrine, consisting of a number of small earthenware pots built into the outside wall of a hut, which the women will regularly fill with beer and porridge. Once a year, on the birthday of the twins, the family head will bring a sacrifice of beer and blood of fowl. Now, twins are lucky and a sign of divine benevolence; equally, they represent a special incarnation, a concentration as it were of the 'kinship soul'. In this sacrifice, then, one addresses *Sokó* as well as (an anonymous) *kuci*; and the people who have such a twin shrine will perform all their sacrifices to *kuci* there, and not over the grave of an individual ancestor.

(v) *Spirit Beings*

In the preceding discussion we touched upon certain beliefs in spirits—in 'ancestral spirits', which are an aspect of the personal soul, and in 'ghosts', which are transmutations of the shadow soul. But when the Nupe mention 'spirits' among the things that make up the world they do not mean either of these; they mean immaterial beings which exist in their own right and are not derived from humans, although they have some quasi-human attributes and inhabit the same earth. It is possible that this belief is not an original tenet of Nupe creed; for the Nupe call these spirit beings by a Hausa–Arabic name, *aljénu* (pl. *aljenúži*), and may well have borrowed certain of their aspects from Islam. However this may be, the Nupe do not regard this belief as in any way alien or 'borrowed'. And whether the name for spirits is Nupe or Arabic, it is a name, sharply distinguishing this class of beings from all others.

Though circumstantial and readily expressed, the spirit beliefs are fluid and far from uniform. The most varied opinions will not be thought unorthodox, but will be taken as evidence for the multifariousness of the spirit world. A first group of spirits, vaguely anthropomorphous but without distinct individualities, is said to inhabit the inanimate parts of nature, hills, trees, watercourses, the bush, and so forth. These spirits have sex, and according to

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some informants the female variety lives in the water while the males prefer the land. The sex of the spirits does not influence their character, which may be either friendly or hostile. The people know where 'good' spirits dwell as well as the places haunted by 'evil ones', and may perform sacrifices to keep their friendship or to ward off their malevolence. Small gifts to the spirits (called *efu*), consisting of a little food, honey, a few kolanuts or cowrie shells, are often left on the roadside, placed beside a spring, or dropped in the river. The behaviour of the good spirits is nondescript and consists in not doing evil or mischief rather than in doing anything positively beneficial. The hostile spirits act erratically and unpredictably, their actions ranging from meaningless pranks (such as throwing stones or making frightening noises) to the infliction of serious harm (causing lunacy or fever, or making pregnant women bear a deformed child). Any locality showing unusual or unnatural features, such as an unexpected clearing in the bush or a grassless patch in a meadow, is likely to be the dwelling place of a spirit; so is any uncommonly large tree in the bush. A woodcutter who is unable to fell a tree, a fisherman who loses his nets in the river for no apparent reason, would equally suspect the presence of an *aljénu*. At midnight, when there is 'no noise and sound', the spirits are likely to be abroad. But on the whole one pays little attention to these 'nature spirits', which can easily be foiled by simply avoiding the haunted locality and against which sacrifices are ample protection.

Only in the Niger valley have I recorded nature spirits ascribed more momentous power as well as names and individualities and worshipped in proper, full-scale rituals. We shall in due course speak of two of them, the spirit *Ketsá*, inhabiting the steep rock of that name which rises in mid-stream near Jebba Island, and the spirit suggestively called *Ndáduma*, 'Father Niger'.

A second group of spirits is vaguely associated with animals. I recorded only two isolated instances of fully-fledged beliefs in animal spirits. The first concerns a spirit called *Bukpe* which lives, in the shape of a crocodile, in a stream near Mokwa. It is supposed to be a male spirit, 'black' or evil, causing disease and drought. Yet its malevolence can be controlled by means of an annual ritual, known by the same name, and by means of a pact concluded between the people of Mokwa and the crocodile spirit. It is part of the pact that the people of Mokwa must never kill or annoy this or any other crocodile, while they in turn will not be harmed by any member of the species. This belief, however, is not willingly put to a test; when I visited *Bukpe* in his lair, my Nupe companions were very careful not to come too close. Some time after my visit the crocodile in fact killed a child; whereupon the people

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of Mokwa, true to the fiction of the 'pact', held a formal court, trying the animal for breaking the pact and passing sentence of death.[1] The power of Mokwa over crocodiles is well known all over Nupe country and, today at least, unrivalled. The village of Katcha, on a tributary of the Niger, apparently had a 'sacred crocodile' in the past; but the charm had failed to work and, less faithful to their cult (or less optimistic) than the people of Mokwa, the people of Katcha abandoned the practice.

My second instance comes from Pichi, a small village near Bida, and concerns a spirit said to be embodied in the leopards of that locality. Surprisingly, it is identified with one of the early chiefs of Pichi, many generations back, and known by his name, *Ndakó Yisa*, Grandfather Yisa; but since all Nupe invariably refer to leopards in this circuitous and respectful manner, and since Yisa is an extremely common name, I am inclined to regard this quasi-totemic interpretation as apocryphal. Nor is the belief very positively stated or accompanied by special rituals. The people believe, however, that no leopard will attack a person of Pichi, and in turn refrain from molesting the animal, even if it kills their dogs or goats.

If animals ever played a more momentous role in the Nupe universe, there is little evidence of it today. Some disconnected 'superstitions' and a few suggestions in folklore are the only instances of this kind. Thus the Nupe believe that animals, like men, have 'spirit doubles' (of which more presently) and that certain animals are also possessed of quasi-human or superhuman faculties. The attitude towards leopards is a case in point. Most villagers are convinced that if the respectful, indirect reference to 'Grandfather Yisa' were omitted, the leopards in the neighbourhood would be annoyed by this 'lack of courtesy' and would surely attack the village (though strict observance of the rule would not make them more amenable or friendly); but no attempt is made to explain the belief or to relate it to some other, more fundamental, tenet of the creed. Much the same applies to 'Father Tortoise', *Ndakpa*, who is the hero of numerous tales, in which he plays the part of a would-be clever fellow who runs into various adventures, either amusing or containing a moral. A small red beetle which appears at the beginning of the rains is called *Sokó*, which odd nomenclature elicits only this comment: 'Since the

[1] The people told me afterwards that the crocodile had in fact died; when I pointed out that I had since seen it in the stream, I was assured that it was 'a different one'. The people of Jebba Island, incidentally, claimed that the river ritual *ketsá* similarly protected all riverain people from crocodiles; which claim was ridiculed by the proud owners of the crocodile cult in Mokwa, who at once recalled that three years previously a Kede man from the river had been killed by a crocodile.

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insect heralds the season, it must surely be sent by God.' We may mention finally that the decorations of houses and the ornaments on leather or carved wood frequently display the outline figures of the 'mythical' animals leopard, tortoise, or crocodile; again, no deeper significance attaches to them; also, today at least, the figures of 'ordinary' animals as well as other designs are as often employed, being all meant 'for amusement only'.

The most interesting variety of spirits is also the one least clearly conceived. This is the personal spirit or spirit double, which belongs to every person from birth until death and cannot be shed or changed. Men have male, women female, spirit doubles, and both can be either good or evil; there is no accounting for the latter fact, which rests entirely 'with God'. The spirits are also of unequal strength and often jealous of one another, forcing their own feelings of hostility upon their human counterparts. The success of a marriage, for example, will be determined by the manner in which the spirit doubles happen to agree. But the spirits are responsible only for the luck and fate of their human twins, not for their character or morals. A friendly spirit will protect its human twin; it will, for example, betray to him in sleep or dream the name of witches who try to harm him. More generally, the 'good' spirit can give wealth, prosperity, and success in everything, at least as much as its strength permits; a weak spirit might well fail in all these attempts; while 'bad' spirits would intentionally make their twins suffer nightmares, illness, and misfortune of all kinds.

Not every illness is of spirit origin; the illness which readily responds to treatment or has a well-understood physical origin (breaking one's leg, food poisoning, and the like), has nothing to do with spirits. Only stubborn or frequent ailments of obscure origin, and especially mental diseases, are ascribed to the spirit doubles. But again, this does not apply to every form of mental disorder. Thus the Nupe define idiocy in what are to them rational terms, as a mere 'deficiency' (*eti a gbà o*—'the head is insufficient'), and point out that it often goes together with bodily deformities. Like the latter, mental deficiency 'simply happens', for example, owing to some carelessness of the expectant mother. 'Raving lunacy', however, is invariably caused by spirits; and, let us note this, since the spirit doubles are part of divine creation, lunacy, being their gift, is ultimately a gift of God. Yet madmen are in no way vessels of divinity; rather are they instances of the misfortunes and evils which God inscrutably dispenses.

The belief in spirit doubles leads to curious consequences. If the power and morals of the spirit determine the success in life of its human double without determining also the character or morals of

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that human, it follows that good spirits can be wedded to evil persons and vice versa. 'Good' spirits might therefore grant success to the most evil machinations, and 'bad' spirits frustrate the best intentions of their human twins. Also, a good person, tied to a good but weak spirit, cannot hope to escape misfortune; while the misfortunes of an evil person who happens to possess an evil spirit double would be as blindly bestowed. All this fits well into a universe which *ab initio* contains good and evil, fortune and misfortune, without moral reasons. But here, in the realm of concrete personal fate, the amorality of the creed is most clearly noticeable. Yet it is so only for us; the Nupe worry little about the ethical issues. Only in one respect do they face these issues and resolve them by admitting this exception to the general rule: Witches always have evil spirit doubles, and these exercise their power, not against their human twins, but against the victims of the latter. But this modification of the spirit belief is slight; for the evilness of the spirit does not make the witch a witch; his or her evil nature is simply given and only aided by the congenial spirit.

A few of the men with whom I discussed these questions seemed prepared to reinterpret the belief in personal spirits more thoroughly. They held that all spirit doubles were 'good', not morally, but in the sense that they served their twins as best as they could. As the spirits were weak or strong, so they would be capable or incapable of gaining success for the human beings, whatever the morals of the latter. These were the views of a minority, and far from correcting the moral ambiguity of the creed they only added to its cynicism. But they seem to indicate a desire to correct another weakness in the creed, which strikes us as forcibly, namely, the supererogatory character of the spirit belief. Clearly, there is no need to make the spirits good and evil as well as weak and strong; the former distinction adds nothing in the way of explanations which the latter does not already furnish.

In a wider sense, the whole conception of personal spirits seems redundant since it accounts for nothing that is not already accounted for by other agencies. Owing to the spirits the human beings meet with fortune and misfortune; but the same fortuitous dispensation of good things and bad is ascribed to the very nature of the created world. The spirit doubles account for nightmares or helpful dreams, but so do the *fifingi* and *kuci*; they bring about illness, but this may equally be due to the weakening of *rayi*, to the attacks of witches, or (as we shall see) to acts of God. The spirit doubles cause afflictions of the mind, but these may again come from God or be rooted in the human body. Altogether, the Nupe creed seems without economy; diverse agencies are introduced to explain the same phenomena, and diverse supernatural

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aids are made to overlap in their aims or concerns. Thus one sacrifices to spirits, twins, kinship souls, and, through rituals, to God himself; or one uses *cigbe*; and one does so for the same reasons —to secure prosperity, to protect oneself from illness, or to safeguard fertility of man or nature. Even so, there is some design and order in this confusing picture; the Nupe universe is not entirely a random array of entities and mystic forces, but something of a cosmos. We shall, by way of a summary, try and outline its features.

4. RELIGION AND POLITY

First, however, I must mention an important figure in the Nupe creed which falls into none of the categories so far discussed— Tsoede or Edegi, the legendary first King of Nupe. The tradition of Tsoede and its essentially political symbolism has been discussed elsewhere, so that here a few remarks will suffice.[1]

Tsoede's memory survives in an elaborate cycle of myths, the only instance of this kind in Nupe; several rituals and sacred objects (an iron chain, brass bangles worn by chiefs, the bronze figures mentioned before) are said to have been his creation; and a specific cult also bears his name. Similar observances also exist, here and there, in the villages, relating to the ancestors of hereditary chiefs; they, too, are sometimes regarded as the founders of their communities or as the initiators of particular cults, their *kuci* being invoked in regular ceremonials. But Tsoede is much more than an ancestor chief magnified, and the rituals called after him do more than merely summon up his memory. Nor is it the *kuci* of Tsoede which is invoked. The concrete ties of descent, implicit in the worship of *kuci*, are obviously absent between the ancestor king and the vast, nation-wide congregation of his cult, while his 'personal soul' has no part in any cycle of rebirth.[2] In the rituals of Tsoede it is he himself who is invoked, so that he may intervene with *Sokó* on behalf of his people. The precise circumstances of this intervention are neither explained nor pictured in any way; yet one knows that it is more powerful as well as active than that accessible to *kuci* (which are merely 'watched by God').

If Tsoede is not a *kuci*, neither is he a 'spirit' nor *aljénu*. He represents, in fact, a figure outside the general framework of Nupe religion and a conception both anomalous and unique in Nupe

[1] See *A Black Byzantium*, pp. 72–76, 141–2.

[2] Tsoede is said to have been harelipped, and every Nupe child born with a harelip is still named after him. But this custom only serves to keep his memory alive; for it has no further consequences and does not imply any belief in Tsoede's reincarnation.

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thought. He is a man-become-deity (though there is no pantheon where he could find a niche), a national hero turned into an ancestral being (though again, there are no named ancestors to whose ranks he might be added). Tsoede is the ancestor only of a line of kings; but in a wider and vaguer sense all Nupe within the kingdom regard themselves with pride as his 'offspring', in the sense, that is, that they were born in a country he founded and made great and come of stock which, originally, lived under his rule and supernatural protection. This protection, which still endures, bears on certain problems of life which are resolved also by means of other rituals or appeals to *Sokó*, namely, the ubiquitous problems of illness and fertility. But these are only incidental effects of Tsoede's mystic power; its main efficacy used to bear on political interests—the maintenance of the 'king's law', the punishment of criminals, and the protection of the 'King's Highway' on the river Niger.[1] Even the 'incidental effects' of the Tsoede cult are bound up with political interests, being embodied in material objects which are at the same time the paraphernalia of secular power. Let me only mention the 'Chain of Tsoede', which is believed to cure the sterility of women but which was formerly also used to strangle political offenders and to uncover crimes in the manner of an ordeal.

In brief, the Tsoede cult is essentially a State religion superimposed upon a pre-existing creed. The cult ties the people to supernatural benefits granted not simply by God, nor by a God who commands his own rituals, but by a God who listens to kings. And its rituals, no longer 'owned' by communities or kin groups, are aligned with the growth and pride of a nation.

5. THE NUPE COSMOS

I spoke before of the supererogatory character of certain Nupe beliefs. In a sense, the greater part of Nupe doctrine has this character. Consider that the Nupe hypothesize a deity who creates the world and then leaves it to itself—uncertain, full of obscurity and accident, and embracing good and evil in entirely fortuitous measure. With such a conception of the relationship between God and the world, the Nupe need not have speculated further about some deeper meaning behind the features of the universe. Anything that exists or happens in it would be sufficiently explained by that key concept of an aloof and non-ethical deity. One might, for example, imagine a religion starting from the same premisses which would leave all further explanations to the crude realism of naïve common sense. Whether so unambitious a theo-

[1] See my article on the 'King's Hangmen' in *Man*, 1935, 143.

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logy is ever likely to arise, I will not venture to discuss. The point is that Nupe theology is more ambitious; the Nupe do speculate further, and reckon with a great many additional (or 'supererogatory') existences and influences. They seem to feel the need to do justice to the particular features of the world by means of particular conceptions, over and above its broad justification in terms of divine creation.

This proliferation of thought is, of course, not peculiar to Nupe religion, though we may note that the Nupe ignore many 'particular' features which other religions feel compelled to acknowledge and elaborate. Thus the Nupe find nothing to explain about the heavenly bodies, do not concern themselves specifically with lightning, thunder, or rain, and speculate only vaguely about animals or natural features. Instead, their attention is focussed upon health and disease, birth and death, fertility, misfortunes, dreams, that is, upon things human. The Nupe elaboration of the universe, we might say, is anthropocentric.

Yet it concentrates on natural man, not on the moral being. Again it neglects all features which might serve this kind of conception, such as an after-life promising reward or retribution, or natural catastrophies that might signify divine anger or warning. Even where the ethical interpretation suggests itself forcibly it is ignored; thus the metamorphosis of the soul stands apart from any ethical design; the powers of good and evil spirits descend on man at random, and the success or failure of supernatural appeals, to ancestors or even to God, do not reflect upon the moral worthiness of the suppliants. There are a few vague notions of divine retribution. Thus it is admitted, but never spontaneously vouchsafed, that incest is punished by barrenness and blindness, and that persons guilty of concealed crimes may be punished by the *kuti* (in an unspecified manner) or killed by lightning (in the case of theft). But these half-hearted concessions do not alter the picture of a creation devoid of moral purpose.

Are, then, all the 'additional influences' which the Nupe read into creation and all their 'further speculations' merely attemps to 'do justice to the particular things in the world', and no more? It may well seem so. There seems to be no other, ulterior, motive behind the readiness to ascribe the contrariness of a tree or the uncanniness of a locality to spirits rather than to nature just-so created; behind the belief that certain ailments betray the machinations of spirits or witches over and above the weakening of the *anima*, and perhaps natural causes; or behind the subdivision of mental afflictions, which are traced to spirits, to the vagaries of the body, and to God. But consider also that these diverse explanations are not kept apart, by some economical parcelling-out of the universe:

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rather, they mostly represent alternatives and overlap for the same phenomena. And since each explanatory conception entails a different notion as to the controls or remedies applicable to the phenomenon in question, the multiplication of the former means also a multiplication of the latter. In other words, you have several strings to your bow. Indeed, this is doubly true. For as we know, the overlap in explanatory conceptions is matched by the overlap in the supernatural aids themselves; like the appeal to the *kuci*, which has 'no domain', ritual and even certain forms of medicine have a wide and multifarious efficacy. The lack of economy of thought thus means first, that the map of the universe is drawn in greater detail, and second, that in coping with its forces one has the chance of several trials.

Now, the 'details' in the universe are not multiplied at random. Rather are they ordered in the sense of two principles. The first reflects the organization of human society as the Nupe see it. Thus there is the sphere of the fate of communities, governed by influences irreducible beyond the givenness of creation and anonymous beyond their ultimate origin in God, which influences are controllable by the collective efforts of *kuti*. Then there is the sphere of individual fate, governed by the specifically named agencies of life soul, shadow soul, witchcraft, and spirits (personal or otherwise), and controllable by *cigbe* and individual sacrifices. There is, further, the sphere of kinship fate, governed by the agency of *kuci* and controlled by sacrifices to ancestors and twins. And there is, finally, the sphere of the kingdom and political fate, with its special rituals of Tsoede. Admittedly, these various spheres are not as neatly separated, the social appropriateness of supernatural aids like the social import of supernatural influences overlapping at many points. Certain nature spirits also affect the fate of communities and hence call for the effort of ritual, while a drought, though it threatens the community, can also be dealt with by an invocation of *kuci*. Certain medicines are owned by kin groups, and certain *kuti* can be invoked by individuals; the twin sacrifices are addressed to God, like the *kuti*; witchcraft, though it attacks individuals, may be treated as a threat to the community or state; and the 'royal' cults of Tsoede also serve to meet the needs of individuals. If there were no such overlap, the chance of 'several trials' would not be as great as it is. But neither is it unlimited, being subject to that hierarchy of social appropriateness, which is only a little blurred by these ambiguities.

The second principle is purely theological and integrates the speculations about the 'details' of the universe with the basic dichotomy of God and the World; for this is carried even into the realm of things found in the world. Thus certain things come

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directly from God, such as the power of *kuti* or the life principle, while others indicate his presence only indirectly or ultimately, in that they are part of creation or happen in it. This is true of *cigbe*, of the nature spirits, and of various diseases and misfortunes. We might say that God willed certain things, while he permits or suffers others to exist. In other religions, a similar dualism might follow from the assumption of divine omnipotence, serving to vindicate the latter in the face of the evils in the world. In Nupe, it follows from the belief in a single act of creation, performed by an aloof creator disinterested in the progress and day-to-day fate of his work. For the two things which are most conspicuously 'willed' by God are also exceptions to this tenet; that is, they vindicate, though not the goodness of the deity, at least his continued concern with the world he called into being.

First, there is the conception of *kuti*, by means of which man can break through the aloofness of the deity. That this is so, is part of God's willed creation; but through investing man with this supernatural tool, God is committed to further acts upon the world he already fashioned once and for all. These renewed acts are only intermittent and in a sense casual, being contingent upon the human appeals; furthermore, man is also competent, and permitted, to fashion similar tools for himself. Thus the created world has some independence and some development of its own, as its human creatures have some inventiveness and will of their own. The second exception goes much farther, implying the continuous creative activity of God. The renewal of life on earth, more precisely, the bestowal of *rayi* upon animate beings, is conceived of in this fashion. This was made clear to me by means of a parable meant to elucidate the relationship of *rayi* and *kuci*. On the surface, the two seem alike, both leaving the human body at death and 'returning to God'. But in one case it is like throwing an object skywards which will soon afterwards drop down again by itself; in the other, you must imagine someone up above who would catch the object, so that it stays in his hands; so the *kuci* goes up to God and returns to find a new incarnation, while the *rayi* goes up and is 'held by God'. The life soul, then, returns to God in the sense that it is re-absorbed in the process of creation; every time it appears on earth, it is a new, separate manifestation of the divine will. The personal or kinship soul, which returns to God only for a while, is independent of this continuous creation; it is as it were continuous in its own right, having its own cycles or chains of existence, which essentially correspond to the empirical cycles or chains of generations. So that it stands, once more, for the world 'left to itself'.

Yet let me admit that in all other respects the dualism of God

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and the world is less sharply conceived than we have phrased it. It is blurred, above all, by the ambiguity of that crucial phrase 'of God'.[1] We can now define it more sharply: The Nupe will generally assert that only certain things in the world are *nya Sokó*, and that others are not; but, when pressed, they will admit that even these 'independent' entities are yet known to God and must in some sense be by his will. Nupe theology, in other words, has not refined its conceptual tools sufficiently to carry this dualism to its logical conclusion. The contrasted concepts which we employed, of things 'willed' by God as against those he only 'suffers' to exist, is beyond its capacity or intentions. Yet the Nupe do express something of the kind in a different way, by default as it were rather than in positive statements, for they leave the share of God in the creation of these 'independent' things of the world unemphasized, like matters that are unimportant and of no consequence. Thus it is important and always stressed that God gave life and ritual to man; and it is unimportant and not normally mentioned that in some fashion divine creation also includes *cigbe*, illness, the shadow soul, evil spirits, lunacy, and witchraft.

I would read a further meaning into this unequal emphasis of the divine share in creation. It suggests, it seems to me, an attempt to gloss over the philosophical difficulties entailed in this conception of a creation which is imperfect and neutral with regard to good and evil. These difficulties might have been resolved in a more sophisticated theology by some pseudo-Thomist doctrine, equating the divine design of the world with perfection and making the world 'left to itself' the source of all imperfections and evils. Yet though Nupe doctrine fails to furnish any such vindication of divine providence, the failure can at least be concealed by the manner in which the doctrine is handled, through emphasis here and 'glossing over' there. These attempts are never more than crude and half-hearted; but the motives behind them are, I think, unmistakable. Indeed, in one instance they even intrude upon the formulated doctrine; and this relates, significantly, to the one form of evil which is specifically and unreservedly ascribed to the deity.

The two most dreaded diseases are in this sense 'of God'—sleeping sickness (*kpatsũgi*) and leprosy (even called *Sokó 'gũ* or *sokogũci*—the 'Illness of God'). Now, God did not pre-ordain them in their deadly form; he created only their possibility, while the actual evils are a consequence of the 'world left to itself', that is, of accident and unpredictable circumstances. When creating man, God placed leprosy and sleeping sickness into every human organism, but he created the two diseases both in male and female form, and an organism possessing one form only remains healthy and

[1] See above, p. 10.

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normal. The actual disease materializes when the two forms happen to be combined in the same person, and the prospects of a cure depend on which 'germ', male or female, is the stronger. Predominantly male leprosy is curable, predominantly female leprosy, fatal. In the case of sleeping sickness everything depends on the treatment, though the prospects are bleak in either case; if a *cigbe* expert succeeds in killing the male 'germ' only, the disease will take its fatal course; in the opposite case death at least will be avoided, though another incurable disease, lunacy, will result.

This is once more a half-hearted vindication of divine providence; all it attempts to prove is that creation is not necessarily evil and that evil things slip into it by chance. Fundamentally, the whole Nupe universe is thus ruled by accident. Such benevolent design as is discernible in it is all too vulnerable and all too easily vitiated by the coexistence of evil. Yet neither are evil and malevolence more securely established. It is true that there is no real struggle between the two, as between opposed wills or destinies, but only the casual share-out of fortunes and misfortunes. Even so there are grounds, if not for an inspiring faith, yet for its cruder version, optimism. And to this, as we shall see, the Nupe firmly cling.

This is not, however, the whole picture. Our view of Nupe religion is still one-sided, based as it is on the doctrine alone, on ideas asserted, taught, and learned as such. Another kind of faith or assurance, less articulate but perhaps more powerful, may spring from the concrete acts of worship, that is, from the psychological stimulations and experiences gained in ritual and other observances. With these the following chapters will deal.

For the moment we need point out only one of the consequences of the Nupe conception of the universe. Clearly, it vouchsafes little certainty or guidance for action. Even the promises of supernatural aid only add to the uncertainties, for as they offer the chance of several trials so they confront the user with the problem of choice, which problem is not always readily solved. But the Nupe universe holds out some promise of certainty and some guidance for action. Both are mechanical and of a case-to-case kind; in other words, they are such as divination can offer. And since this guidance is required both for the problems of everyday life and for the handling of the supernatural tools meant to aid man in these problems, divination becomes a prerequisite, not only of provident action in general, but also of religious actions. It seems logical, therefore, to turn to divination first, and afterwards to ritual, medicine, and to all the other 'supernatural tools'.